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During 1967-1968, the English Department at Pennsylvania State University, York Campus, used cartridge tape recorders on a trial basis to grade student themes. Each student in a two-term composition course purchased one tape cartridge which he submitted with each theme. While correcting the theme, the instructor recorded comments on the student's tape. The student could then listen to criticism of his paper as frequently as he wished by using the tape recorders in the library. Most students appreciated the more thorough analysis that this system afforded, although a few objected to the inconvenience of borrowing a library recorder or the inability to refer quickly to a written comment. Most of the composition instructors reacted favorably to the use of the recorder and felt that speaking directly to the student was more satisfactory, and personal, than writing comments on themes. (JM)

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Using The Cartridge Tape Recorder To Grade Themes

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The idea of using a voice recording device to grade themes has been in existence for some time, but until recently the mechanical problems involved have made the process discouragingly complex. Now, however, a new technical development--the instant loading tape cartridge--has greatly simplified the process of tape recording and made it possible to consider seriously its use for theme grading. During 1967-68 the English department at the York Campus of The Pennsylvania State University used cartridge tape recorders on a trial basis to grade themes; and the results indicate that this device can allow the composition instructor, speaking directly through this medium to each individual student, to perform his task in a more satisfactory way.

The problem which the cartridge recorder helps to solve is a familiar one to the composition instructor--how to comment adequately on each paper when he is faced with the weekly task of grading 25, 50, or more papers. Customarily the instructor goes through a theme using red ink on the margins to indicate lapses in grammar, syntax, mechanics, and the like; then at the end he scratches a few lines of comment for the paper as a whole. It is at this point that the hard-pressed instructor is usually forced by circumstances to say a good deal less than he feels is really needed. Faced with the burdensome weekly tasks of writing a longhand commentary of suitable length on each of 50 or more papers, he compromises and settles for a brief paragraph on the most apparent weakness or strength of the paper.

Most of us who teach composition would probably agree that in the ideal situation the instructor would meet personally with each student after his paper had been graded and returned to discuss it with him at length. Unfortunately, as everyone who is involved in the process knows, composition instructors today are not in a position to do this or anything like it. Even if the instructor had the necessary time, the mere mechanics of scheduling 50 or more interviews of at least 15 minutes each every week would make the process impossibly complex. But an instructor using the cartridge recorder can speak individually to each student, for as long as he likes and at the time of his own choosing, just as though the student were seated alongside him in his office. And the student keeps in his own possession a taped record of all that has been said, a record which he can hear again as often as he presses a button to have it replayed.

The new development in recording which makes this possible is

known as the "AC 60 Instant-Loading Tape Cartridge." It is a miniature tape one-eighth inch wide enclosed permanently in a compact flat plastic case occupying less space than a pack of cigarettes. The unique feature of this tape is that it does not require threading or winding onto the recorder before use. Two small reels within the case wind the tape forward and backward as required, and the whole assembly snaps easily over two power spindles on the recorder which is instantly ready to play. The cartridge provides from 30 to 60 minutes of play, depending on the price, and can be reused as often as desired. It is manufactured by General Electric, 3M Scotch Brand, and others, and is widely sold. The price varies from two to three dollars, depending on the quality of reproduction and the length of play.

The tape recorder which plays the cartridge is also compact and efficient. The make used at the York Campus is the General Electric Model M8300 Cartridge Recorder which measures nine by five by two inches and weighs approximately four pounds--no more bulky than many books. It is powered either by five self-contained size "C" dry cell batteries or from an external power source, and comes in a case which contains a microphone for recording and an ear plug for listening when the use of the speaker would disturb others nearby. The operation of the recorder is quite simple and can be mastered by even the most confused freshman after a few minutes of instruction. The machine retails for about $55.00 at the time of this writing.

The York Campus has several of these recorders, one for the personal use of each composition instructor, and five for use in the reading room of the library by the students. Freshmen are required to purchase one tape cartridge, which can be used for the two terms of composition required here.

The students write and submit their themes in the usual manner, except that each paragraph is numbered on the margin. But at the time of submission each student must turn in along with his paper a tape cartridge with his name written on it. The instructor puts the cartridges in a box--25 cartridges can be fitted into a container about the size of a shoe box--and takes them back to his office along with the papers. When he is ready to grade the papers he puts them on his desk along with the box of cartridges and a tape recorder with the microphone plugged in and ready to record.

Instructors naturally differ somewhat in their techniques, but what follows is typical. The instructor selects a paper from the pile, finds the author's cartridge among those in the box, and snaps it into place on the recorder. Then he starts through the paper with the usual red pen in hand, but with the microphone also lying ready on the desk in front of him. If a point in the paper requires only a correction symbol or a word or two on the margin, he uses red ink in the usual fashion. But if at any time he feels the need to amplify further, he picks up the microphone, locates the passage in question for the listening student by referring to page and paragraph number, and speaks to the point. At the end the instructor uses the microphone to make a critical analysis of the paper as a whole.

When he returns the papers to his class, he also returns the cartridges containing his recorded comments. The student at his convenience takes his paper and cartridge to the library, where he goes to the reading room and checks out a recorder. Taking it to a table, he spreads out his paper, snaps in the cartridge, puts on the ear plug, and, as he reads through the theme, listens to what his instructor has to say about it. If at any time he wishes to hear something repeated, he pushes a button to stop the machine, rewinds the tape to the desired point, and hears the instructor's remarks again.

A major advantage of using the recorder has already been mentioned. The instructor, freed from the laborious necessity of writing a longhand commentary on each paper, can speak at greater length. He can, for example, suggest some alternative approaches, refer to class discussion, talk about fine points of style, and generally discuss rhetorical matters in a more ample and more satisfactory way than is possible when he can only scribble a few terse sentences of criticism at the end of the paper. This method also gives the student a feeling of personal contact with his instructor which is otherwise lacking.

However, there is one obvious difference between the student's listening to his instructor on tape and having a personal interview with him--the student cannot ask questions, answer criticism, or explain why he wrote as he did. The answer to this objection is that the use of the cartridge recorder is not intended to eliminate the necessity for the instructor to be available to students when they wish to talk to him at the York Campus. If--after hearing the instructor's recorded comments--the student wishes to discuss the paper further he comes to see him during the hours appointed for this purpose, bringing with him his paper and his tape cartridge. Using the instructor's recorder, they listen together to what he said about the point in question, and whatever is not clear to the student they then resolve in discussion.

Students at the York Campus whose papers were tape-graded were asked to put in writing their reactions to this method at the end of each term. The response of all but a few was favorable. They generally felt that hearing the voice of the instructor speaking to each of them personally created more interest and had a much greater impact than sometimes cryptic marginal notes. They also felt that the more extensive vocal comments gave them a clearer idea of where some papers were weak and what could be done to improve them. A few, however, objected to the necessity for taking themes to the library and checking out a recorder, and sometimes, if an entire class rushed to the library immediately after papers were returned, students had to wait for a machine.

A more valid objection voiced was that when comments are not written the student cannot look back through his papers for a quick reference to what has been said. It is true that the tape does not provide as fast a reference to the instructor's criticism as do written comments. However, the student does have access without difficulty to what has been said on his tape about past papers. There is

a dial on the face of each cartridge case which shows how much of the tape has been used at any time, so that it is possible for the user to make a record of where on the tape the commentary of each theme is and to locate it in a minute or two by rewinding to that point.

Most composition instructors at the York Campus also reacted favorably to the use of the recorder after having used it for a time. Only one was steadfast in his opposition to electronic gadgetry in any form. He did not like the idea in the beginning and was confirmed in his dislike at the end of a term, and now rejects the whole concept as being entirely too cluttered with wires, batteries, switches, buttons, and similar annoyances. The others, however, after experimenting with two or three sets of papers, began to feel at ease with the microphone in hand and devised a routine which enabled them to grade papers rapidly and without strain. However, those who hoped by using the recorder to shorten the time necessary to grade papers were disappointed. In fact there is a danger that the instructor, becoming enchanted at the sound of his own voice, will find that he has spent twice the usual time required to grade a paper. Instructors using the recorder who are apt to be long-winded must resist this tendency for the sake of efficiency in grading papers.

Many English faculty are suspicious of electronic and mechanical devices touted to revolutionize the learning process--and with good reason. The cartridge tape recorder is certainly no kind of panacea for the troubles with which the instruction of English composition is perennially beset.

It is, however, a simple and relatively inexpensive device which--when properly used--allows the instructor to do a more thorough job of analysis and criticism of the student's work than is otherwise possible and gives the student a feeling of personal contact with the instructor which is often missing in conventional grading.